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- A BLACK AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE

FUTURE OF AFRICAN THEOLOGY

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This is the fourth of a series of documents being projected by the Secretariat of Theology in the Americas in an effort to share with a wider audience the theological reflections coming out of the Theology in the Americas process. This fourth document consists of two presentations given by Black Theologian Dr. James Cone at two different conferences organized by projects related to Theology in the Americas. The first presentation, "Black Theology and the Black Church, Where Do We Go From Here?" was prepared for the Black Theology Project's conference on "Black Church and Black Community: Unity and Education for Action," August 2-7, 1977, Atlanta, Georgia. In it Cone provides an overview of some current trends in Black Theology and makes a strong case for a "global perspective" within the future direction of Black Theology. The second presentation, "A Black American Perspective on the Future of African Theology," was prepared for the Pan African Conference of Third World Theologians, December 17-24, 1977, Accra, Ghana. In it Cone, speaking as a Black North American, gives a critique of African Theology.

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BLACK THEOLOGY AND THE BLACK CHURCH

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

by

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Since the appearance of black theology in the late 1960's, much has been written and said about the political involvement of the black church in black people's historical struggle for justice in North America. Black theologians and preachers have rejected the white church's attempt to separate love from justice and religion from politics because we are proud descendants of a black religious tradition that has always interpreted its confession of faith according to the people's commitment to the struggle for earthly freedom. Instead of turning to Reinhold Niebuhr and John Bennett for ethical guidance in those troubled times, we searched our past for insight, strength and the courage to speak and do the truth in an extreme situation of oppression. The names of Richard Allen and James Verick, Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, Henry McNeal Turner and Martin Luther King, Jr., became household names as we attempted to create new theological categories that would express our historical fight for justice.

It was in this context that the "Black Power" statement was written in July 1966 by an ad hoc National Committee of Negro Churchmen.¹ The cry of Black Power by Willie Ricks and its political and intellectual development by Stokely Carmichael and others challenged the black church beyond the models of love defined in the context of white religion and theology. The black church was thus faced with a theological dilemma: either it must reject Black Power as a contradiction of Christian love and thereby join the white church in its condemnation of Black Power advocates as un-American and unchristian; or the black church could accept Black Power as a socio-political expression of the truth of the gospel. These two possibilities were the only genuine alternatives before us, and we had to decide on whose side we would take our stand.

We knew that to define Black Power as the opposite of the Christian faith was to reject the central role that the black church has

played in black people's historical struggle for freedom. Rejecting Black Power also meant that the black church would ignore its political responsibility to empower black people in their present struggle to make our children's future more humane than intended by the rulers in this society. Faced with these unavoidable consequences, it was not possible for any self-respecting church-person to desecrate the memories of our mothers and fathers in the faith by siding with white people who murdered and imprisoned black people simply because of our persistent audacity to assert our freedom. To side with white theologians and preachers who questioned the theological legitimacy of Black Power would have been similar to one siding with St. George Methodist Church against Richard Allen and the Bethelites in their struggle for independence during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. We knew that we could not do that, and no amount of white theological reasoning would be allowed to blur our vision of the truth.

But to accept the second alternative and thereby locate Black Power in the Christian context was not easy. First, the acceptance of Black Power would appear to separate us from Martin Luther King, Jr., and we did not want to do that. King was our model, having creatively combined religion and politics, and black preachers and theologians respected his courage to concretize the political consequences of his confession of faith. Thus we hesitated to endorse the "Black Power" movement, since it was created in the context of the James Meredith March by Carmichael and others in order to express their dissatisfaction with King's continued emphasis on non-violence and Christian love.² As a result of this sharp confrontation between Carmichael and King, black theologians and preachers felt themselves caught in a terrible predicament of wanting to express their continued respect for and solidarity with King, but disagreeing with this rejection of Black Power.

Secondly the concept of Black Power presented a problem for black theologians and preachers not only because of our loyalty to Martin Luther King, but also because many of us had been trained in white seminaries and had internalized much of white people's definition of Christianity. While the rise and growth of independent black churches suggested that black people had a different perception of the gospel than whites, yet there was no formal theological tradition to which we could turn in order to justify our definition of Black Power as an expression of the Christian gospel. Our intellectual ideas of God, Jesus, and the Church were derived from white European theologians and their textbooks. When we speak of Christianity in theological categories, using such terms as revelation, incarnation and reconciliation, we naturally turn to people like Barth, Tillich and Bultmann for guidance and direction. But these Europeans did not shape their ideas in the social context of white racism and thus could not help us out of our dilemma. But if we intended to fight on a theological and intellectual level

as a way of empowering our historical and political struggle for justice, we had to create a new theological movement, one that was derived from and thus accountable to our people's fight for justice. To accept Black Power as Christian required that we thrust ourselves into our history in order to search for new ways to think and be black in this world. We felt the need to explain ourselves and to be understood from our own vantage point and not from the perspective and experiences of whites. When white liberals questioned this approach to theology, our response was very similar to the bluesman in Mississippi when told he was not singing his song correctly: "Look-a-heah, man, dis yere mah song, en I'll sing it howsoevah I pleases."³

Thus we sang our Black Power songs, knowing that the white church establishment would not smile upon our endeavors to define Christianity independent of their own definitions of the gospel. For the power of definition is a prerogative that oppressors never want to give up. Furthermore, to say that love is compatible with Black Power is one thing but to demonstrate this compatibility in theology and the praxis of life is another. If the reality of the thing was no more than its verbalization in a written document, the black church since 1966 would be a model of the creative integration of theology and life, faith and the struggle for justice. But we know that the meaning of reality is found only in its historical embodiment in people as structured in societal arrangements and not simply in the sermons we preach. Love's meaning is not found in a theological textbook but rather in the creation of social structures that are not dehumanizing and oppressive. This insight impressed itself on our religious consciousness, and we were deeply troubled by the inadequacy of our historical obedience when measured by our faith claims. Thus from 1966 to the present, black theologians and preachers, in the context of the church and the streets, have been searching for new ways to confess and to live our faith in God so that the black church would not make religion the opiate of our people.

The term "Black Theology" was created in this social and religious context. It was initially understood as the theological arm of Black Power, and it enabled us to express our theological imagination in the struggle of freedom independently of white theologians. It was the one term that white ministers and theologians did not like, because, like Black Power in politics, black theology located the theological starting point in the black experience and not the particularity of the western theological tradition. We did not feel ourselves accountable to Aquinas, Luther or Calvin but to David Walker, Daniel Payne and W.E.B. DuBois. The depth and passion in which we express our solidarity with the black experience over against the western tradition led some black scholars, in religion to reject theology itself as alien to the black culture.⁴ Others, while not rejecting theology entirely, con-

tended that black theologians should turn primarily to African religions and philosophy in order to develop a black theology consistent with and accountable to our historical roots.⁵ But all of us agreed that we were living at the beginning of a new historical moment, and this required the development of a black frame of reference that many called "black theology."

The consequence of our affirmation of a black theology led to the creation of black caucuses in white churches, a permanent ecumenical church body under the title of the National Conference of Black Churchmen, and the endorsement of James Forman's "Black Manifesto." In June 1969 at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta and under the aegis of NCBC's Theological Commission, a group of black theologians met to write a policy statement on black theology. This statement was influenced by my book, Black Theology and Black Power, which had appeared two months earlier. Black Theology was defined as a "theology of black liberation."⁶

//Black theology then was not created in a vacuum and neither was it simply the intellectual enterprise of black professional theologians. Black theology like our sermons and songs, was born in the context of the black community as black people were attempting to make sense out of their struggle of freedom. In one sense, black theology is as old as when the first African refused to accept slavery as consistent with religion and as recent as when a black person intuitively recognizes that the confession of the Christian faith receives its meaning only in relation to political justice. Formally black theology appeared when the first book was published on the subject in 1969. But informally, the reality that made the book possible was already present in the black experience and was found in our songs, prayers, and sermons. In these outpourings are expressed the black visions of truth, pre-eminently the certainty that we were not created for slavery but for freedom. Without this dream of freedom, so vividly expressed in the life, teachings, and death of Jesus, Malcolm, and Martin, there would be no black theology, and we would have no reason to be assembled in this place. We have come here today, to plan our future and to map out our strategy because we have a dream that has not been realized.

To be sure, we have talked and written about this dream. Indeed, every Sunday morning black people gather in our churches, to find out where we are in relation to the actualization of our dream. The black church community really believes that where there is no vision the people perish. If people have no dreams they will accept the world as it is and will not seek to change it. To dream is to know what is ain't suppose to be. No one in our time expressed this eschatological note any clearer than Martin Luther King, Jr. In his "March on Washington" address in 1963 he said: "I have a dream that one day my four children

will live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." And the night before his death in 1968, he reiterated his eschatological vision: "I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land."

What visions do we have for the people in 1977? Do we still believe with Martin King that "we as a people will get to the promised land"? If so, how will we get there? Will we get there simply by preaching sermons and singing songs about it? What is the black church doing in order to actualize the dreams that it talks about? These are hard questions, and they are not intended as a put-down of the black church. I was born in the black church in Bearden, Arkansas, and began my ministry in that church at the early age of sixteen. Everything I am as well as what I know that I ought to be was shaped in the context of the black church. Indeed, it is because I love the church that I am required, as one of its theologians and preachers, to ask: "When does the black church's actions deny its faith? What are the activities in our churches that should not only be rejected as unchristian but also exposed as demonic? What are the evils in our church and community that we should commit ourselves to destroy?" Bishops, pastors, and church executives do not like to disclose the wrong doings of their respective denominations. They are like doctors, lawyers, and other professionals who seem bound to keep silent, because to speak the truth is to guarantee one's exclusion from the inner dynamics of power in the profession. But I contend that the faith of the black church lays a claim upon all church people that transcends the social mores of a given profession. Therefore, to cover-up and to minimize the sins of the church is to guarantee its destruction as a community of faith, committed to the liberation of the oppressed. If we want the black church to live beyond our brief histories and thus to serve as the "Old Ship of Zion" that will carry the people home to freedom, then we had better examine the direction in which the ship is going. Who is the Captain of the Ship, and what are his economic and political interests? This question should not only be applied to bishops, but to pastors and theologians, deacons and stewards. Unless we are willing to apply the most severe scientific analysis to our church communities in terms of economics and politics and be willing to confess and repent of our sins in the struggle for liberation, then the black church, as we talk about it, will remain a relic of history and nothing more. God will have to raise-up new instruments of freedom so that his faithfulness to liberate the poor and weak can be realized in history. We must not forget that God's Spirit will use us as her instrument only in so far as we remain agents of liberation by using our resources for the empowerment of the poor and weak. But if we, like Israel in the Old Testament, forget about our Exodus experience and the political responsibility it lays upon us to be the historical embodiment of freedom, then, again like Israel,

we will become objects of God's judgement. It is very easy for us to expose the demonic and oppressive character of the white church, and I have done my share of that. But such exposures of the sins of the white church, without applying the same criticism to ourselves, is hypocritical and serves as a camouflage of our own shortcomings and sins. Either we mean what we say about liberation or we do not. If we mean it, the time has come for an inventory in terms of the authenticity of our faith as defined by the historical commitment of the black denominational churches toward liberation.

I have lectured and preached about the black church's involvement in our liberation struggle all over North America. I have told the stories of Richard Allen and James Varick, Adam Clayton Powell and Martin Luther King. I have talked about the double-meaning in the Spirituals, the passion of the sermon and prayer, the ecstasy of the shout and conversation experience in terms of an eschatological happening in the lives of people, empowering them to fight for earthly freedom. Black theology, I have contended, is a theology of liberation, because it has emerged out of and is accountable to a black church that has always been involved in our historical fight for justice. When black preachers and laypeople hear this message, they respond enthusiastically and with a sense of pride that they belong to a radical and creative tradition. But when I speak to young blacks in colleges and universities, most are surprised that such a radical black church tradition really exists. After hearing about David Walker's "Appeal" in 1829, Henry H. Garnet's "Address to the Slaves" in 1843, and Henry M. Turner's affirmation that "God is a Negro" in 1898, these young blacks are shocked. Invariably they ask, "Whatever happened to the black churches of today?" "Why don't we have the same radical spirit in our preachers and churches?" Young blacks contend that the black churches of today, with very few exceptions, are not involved in liberation but primarily concerned about how much money they raise for a new church building or the preacher's anniversary.

This critique of the black church is not limited to the young college students. Many black people view the church as a hindrance to black liberation, because black preachers and church members appear to be more concerned about their own institutional survival than the freedom of poor people in their communities. "Historically," many radical blacks say, "the black church was involved in the struggle but today it is not." They often turn the question back upon me, saying: "All right, granted what you say about the historical black church, but where is an institutional black church denomination that still embodies the vision that brought it into existence? Are you saying that the present day AME church or AME Zion Church has the same historical commitment for justice that it had under the leadership of Allen and Payne or Rush and Varick?" Sensing that they have a point

difficult to refute, these radicals then say that it is not only impossible to find a black church denomination committed to black liberation but also difficult to find a local congregation that defines its ministry for the oppressed and their liberation.

Whatever we might think about the unfairness of this severe indictment, we would be foolish to ignore it. For connected with this black critique is our international image. In the African context, not to mention Asia and Latin America, the black church experiences a similar credibility problem. There is little in our theological expressions and church practice that rejects American capitalism that is so oppressive in Third World countries. The time has come for us to move beyond institutional survival in a capitalistic and racist society and begin to take more seriously our dreams about a new heaven and a new earth. Does this dream include capitalism or is it a radically new way of life more consistent with African socialism as expressed in the Arusha Declaration in Tanzania?⁷

I think the time has come for black theologians and church people to move beyond a mere reaction to white racism in America and begin to extend our vision of a new socially constructed humanity in the whole inhabited world. We must be concerned with the quality of human life not only in the ghettos of American cities but also in Africa, Asia and Latin America. For humanity is whole, and cannot be isolated into racial and national groups. Indeed there will be no freedom for anyone until there is freedom for all. This means that we must stretch our vision by connecting it with other oppressed people's visions so that together all the victims of the world might take charge of their history for the creation of a new humanity. As Franz Fanon has taught us: if we wish to live up to our people's expectations, we must look beyond European and American capitalism. Indeed, "we must invent and we must make discoveries. ...For Europe, for ourselves and for humanity, we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new (humanity)."⁸

New times require new concepts and methods. To dream is not enough. We must come down from the mountain top and experience the hurts and pain of the people in the valley. Our dreams need to be socially analyzed, for without scientific analysis they will vanish into the night. Furthermore, social analysis will test the nature of our commitment to the dreams we preach and sing about. This is one of the important principles we learned from Martin King and many black preachers who worked with him. Real substantial change in societal structures require scientific analysis. King's commitment to social analysis not only characterized his involvement in the civil rights movement but also led him to take a radical stand against the war in Vietnam. Through scientific analysis, King saw the connection

between the oppression of blacks in the USA and America's involvement in Vietnam. It is to his credit that he never allowed a pietistic faith in the other world to become a substitute for good judgement in this world. He not only preached sermons about the promised land but concretized his vision with a political attempt to actualize his hope.

I realize, with Merleau Ponty, that "one does not become a revolutionary through science but through indignation."⁹ Every revolution needs its Rosa Parks. This point has often been overlooked by some Marxists and other sociologists who seem to think that all answers are found in scientific analysis. Mao Tse-tung responded to such an attitude with this comment: "There are people who think that Marxism is a kind of magic truth with which one can cure any disease. We should tell them that dogmas are more useless than cow dung. Dung can be used as fertilizer."¹⁰

But these comments do not disprove the truth of the Marxists' social analysis which focuses on economics and class and is intended as empowerment for the oppressed to radically change human social arrangements. Such an analysis will help us not only to understand the relation between economics and oppression in North America but also throughout the world. Liberation is not a process limited to black-white relations in the United States; it is also a process to be applied to the relations between the rich and poor nations of the Third World. If we are an African people as some of the names of our churches suggest, then in what way are we to understand the political meaning of that identity? In what way does the economic investment of our church resources reflect our commitment to Africa and other oppressed people in the world? For if an economic analysis of our material resources do not reveal our commitment to the process of liberation, how can we claim that the black church and its theology are concerned about the freedom of oppressed peoples? As an Argentine peasant poet said:

They say that God cares for the poor:
Well this may be true or not,
But I know for a fact
That he dines with the mine-owner.¹¹

Because the Christian church has supported the capitalists, many Marxists contend that "all revolutions have clashed with Christianity because historically Christianity has been structurally counter-revolutionary."¹² We may rightly question this assertion and appeal to the revolutionary expressions of Christianity in the black religious tradition, from Nat Turner to Martin Luther King. But I do not want to debate the fine points of what constitutes revolution. I have another concern, and that is to open-up the reality of the black church experience and its revolutionary potential to a world context. This means that we can learn from people in Africa, Asia and Latin America,

and they can learn from us. Learning from others involves listening to creative criticism, for to exclude it is to isolate ourselves from the world politics and this exclusion makes our faith nothing but a reflection of our economic interests. If Jesus Christ is more than a religious expression of our economic and sexist interests, then there is no reason to resist the truth of the Marxist and feminist analyses.

I contend that black theology is not afraid of truth from any quarter. We simply reject the attempt of others to tell us what truth is without our participation in its definition. That is why dogmatic Marxists seldom succeed in the black community, especially when the dogma is filtered through a brand of white racism not unlike that of the capitalists. If our long history of struggle has taught us anything, it is that if we are to be free, we black people will have to do it. Freedom is not a gift but is a risk that must be taken. No one can tell us what liberation is and how we ought to struggle for it, as if liberation can be found in words. Liberation is a process to be located and understood only in an oppressed community who want to talk to us about this liberation process in global terms and from Marxist and other perspectives, we should be ready to talk. But only if they are prepared to listen to us and we to them will genuine dialogue take place. For I will not listen to anybody who refuses to take racism seriously, especially when they themselves have not been victims of it. And they should listen to us only if we are prepared to listen to them in terms of the particularity of oppression in their historical context.

Therefore, I reject dogmatic Marxism that reduces every contradiction to class analysis and thus ignores racism as a legitimate point of departure in the process of liberation. There are racist Marxists as there are racist capitalists, and we must struggle against both. But we must be careful not to reject the message of the Marxist's social analysis simply because we do not like the vessels that the message comes in. If we do that, then it is hard to explain how we can remain Christians in view of the white vessels in which the gospel was first introduced to black people.

The world is small. Politically and economically our freedom is connected with the struggles of oppressed peoples throughout the world. This is the truth of Pan-Africanism as represented in the life and thought of W.E.B. DuBois, George Padmore, and C.L.R. James. Liberation knows no color bar. Unlike oppression that is often limited to color, the very nature of the gospel is universalism, i.e. a liberation that embraces the whole of humanity.

The need for a global perspective in black theology which takes seriously the struggles of oppressed peoples in other parts of the world has already been recognized, and small beginnings have been made

with conferences on African and black theologies in Tanzania, New York and Ghana. Another example of the recognition of this need is reflected in the dialogue between black theology in South Africa and North America. From the very beginning black theology has been influenced by a world perspective as defined by Henry M. Turner, Marcus Garvey, and the Pan-Africanism inaugurated in the life and work of W.E.B. DuBois. The importance of this Pan-African perspective in black religion and theology has been cogently defended in Gayraud Wilmore's Black Religion and Black Radicalism. Furthermore our active involvement in the "Theology in the Americas," under whose aegis this conference is held, is our attempt to enlarge our perspective in relation to Africa, Asia, and Latin America as well as to express our solidarity with other oppressed minorities in the U.S.

This global perspective in black theology enlarges our vision regarding the process of liberation. What does black theology have to say about the fact that two-thirds of humanity is poor and that this poverty arises from the exploitation of the poor nations by rich nations. The people of the U.S.A. compose 6% of the world's population, but we consume 40% of the world resources. What then is the implication of the black demand for justice in the U.S. when related to justice for all the world's victims? The dependent status we experience in relation to white people, Third World countries experience in relation to the U.S. Thus in our attempt to liberate ourselves from white America in the U.S., it is important to be sensitive to the complexity of the world situation and the oppressive role of the U.S. in it. African, Latin American, and Asian theologians, as well as sociologists and political scientists, can aid us in the analysis of this complexity. In this analysis, our starting point in terms of racism is not negated but enhanced when connected with imperialism and sexism.

We must create a global vision of human liberation and include in it the distinctive contribution of the black experience. We have been struggling for nearly 400 years! What has that experience taught us that would be useful in the creation of a new historical future for all oppressed peoples? And what can others teach us from their historical experience in the struggle for justice? This is the issue that black theology needs to address. And the "Theology in the Americas" provides an occasion in which to address it. I hope that we will not back off from this important task but will face it with courage, knowing that the future of humanity is in the hands of oppressed peoples, because God has said: "Those that hope in me shall not be put to shame" (Is. 49:23).

NOTES

1. This statement first appeared in the New York Times, July 31, 1966, and is reprinted in Warner Traynham.
2. For an account of the rise of the concept of Black Power in the Civil Rights Movement, see Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, Black Power: The Politics of Black Liberation (New York: Random House). For Martin King's viewpoint, see his Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?
3. Cited in Lawrence W. Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 207.
4. This is especially true of Charles Long who has been a provocative discussant about black theology. Unfortunately, he has not written much about this viewpoint. The only article I know on this subject is his "Perspectives for a Study of Afro-American Religion in the United States," History of Religions, Vol. 11, #1, August 1971.
5. The representatives of this perspective include Gayraud S. Wilmore, Black Religion and Black Radicalism (New York: Doubleday, 1972), and my brother, Cecil W. Cone, Identity Crisis in Black Theology (Nashville: AMEC 1976).
6. This statement was issued on June 13, 1969, and reprinted in Warner Traynham, Christian Faith in Black and White (Wakefield, MA: Parameter, 73).
7. See Julius Nyerere, Ujamaa: Essays on Socialism (Dar es Salaam: Oxford University Press, 1968).
8. Franz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (New York: Grove Press, 1966), p. 255.
9. Cited in Jose Miguez Bonino, Christians and Marxists (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 76.
10. Cited in George Padmore, Pan-Africanism or Communism (New York: Anchor Books; 1972), p. 323.
11. Cited in Bonino, Christians and Marxists, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 71.
12. A quotation from Giulio Girardi, cited in Bonino, Christians and Marxists, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 71.

A BLACK AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE
ON THE FUTURE OF AFRICAN THEOLOGY

by

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Because I am a black North American, whose theological consciousness was shaped in the historical context of the Civil Rights movement of the 1950's¹ and the subsequent rise of Black Power during the 1960's, it is difficult for me to speak about the future of African Theology without relating it to the social and political context of black people's struggle for freedom in the United States of America. The effect of this social reality upon my theological perspective could blind me to the uniqueness of the African situation. The concern to accent the distinctiveness of the African context has led many African theologians to separate African Theology not only from traditional European theology but also from American Black Theology. In an article entitled "An African Views American Black Theology," John Mbiti is emphatic on this issue

The concerns of Black Theology differ considerably from those of African Theology. (African Theology) grows out of our joy in the experience of the Christian faith, whereas Black Theology emerges from the pains of oppression. African Theology is not so restricted in its concerns, nor does it have an ideology to propagate. Black Theology hardly knows the situation of Christian living in Africa, and therefore its direct relevance for Africa is either non-existent or only accidental.³

In order to appreciate the seriousness and depth of Mbiti's concern, it is necessary to point out that his perspective is not based upon a superficial encounter with Black Theology. On the contrary, Mbiti made these remarks after he and I had had many conversations on the subject in the context of our jointly taught year-long course on African and Black theologies at Union Theological Seminary.⁴ Nevertheless, it seems to me that he misrepresented Black Theology.⁵ More important, however, was Mbiti's contention that African and Black American theolo-

gians should have no more than an indirect or accidental interest in each other. This perspective on African Theology not only makes substantive dialogue difficult but also excludes black American theologians from a creative participation in the future development of African Theology.

John Mbiti is not alone in making a sharp distinction between Black Theology and African Theology. Similar views are found in the writings of Harry Sawyerr,⁶ E.W. Fashole-Luke,⁷ and (to a lesser extent) Kwesi Dickson.⁸ While there are significant exceptions to this perspective among theologians in Southern African and also among certain African church-people associated with the All-Africa Conference of Churches,⁹ these exceptions do not remove the risks inherent in any attempt by a North American to speak about the future of African Theology. For there is much truth in the wide-spread belief that the future of African Theology belongs to Africans alone.

There is a second difficulty in approaching this topic, in addition to existential and intellectual sensitivities of African theologians. That other problem is the existential conflict inherent in my double identity as American and African. This identity conflict is wide-spread among black Americans, and it is a prominent theme in black literature and theology. This theme is found in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man and in James Baldwin's claim that "Nobody knows my name." In a theological context, Cecil Cone has addressed this problem in his book entitled The Identity Crisis in Black Theology.¹⁰ But one of the earliest and most classic statements on this problem is found in the writings of W.E.B. DuBois:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.¹¹

The significance of the problem of black identity in the context of African Theology may be clarified by asking: How can I speak about the future of African Theology when my black identity is so inextricably tied to North America? Aside from the technicality of my genetic origin and its relation to the African continent, what right do I have to participate in the future development of African Theology? Unless these questions are honestly faced, then the relations between African Theology and Black Theology will remain superficial. The purpose of this essay is to attempt to move our dialogue beyond the phase of theo-

logical politeness to a serious encounter of each other's historical options. What is the relation between our different historical contexts and our common faith in God's power to make us all one in Jesus Christ? How do we translate the universal claim of our faith into a common historical practice? These are the issues that define the focus of this paper.

In order to protect against a possible misunderstanding of my concern, an additional word of clarification is necessary. If by African Theology we mean an interpretation of the Christian gospel in the light of the political and cultural situation in Africa, then it is obvious that the future of this enterprise belongs primarily to Africans alone. Persons who have little or no knowledge of Africa or whose theological consciousness was shaped elsewhere should not expect to play a decisive role in the future development of theology on the African continent. This point is applicable not only to white Europeans but to black Americans as well. I want to emphasize this point, because my disagreement with Mbiti and other African theologians who separate radically African Theology and Black Theology does not mean that I believe that black Americans should play a major role in the formulation of the meaning of African Theology. My contention is that Black and African theologies are not as different as has been suggested and that their common concerns require a dialogue that is important to both. I want to suggest two reasons why we ought to engage in a substantive dialogue, and then use the third section of this paper to say a word about the future of African Theology.

I

The history of American blacks cannot be completely separated from the history of Africa. Therefore, whatever may be said about the significant distinctions between Africans and black people of the American diaspora, there was once a time when these distinctions did not exist. The significance of this point extends beyond a mere academic interest in historical origins. The recognition of the inter-relation of our histories is also important for assessing our present realities and the shaping of our future hopes and dreams. Whether we live in Africa or the Americas, there is some sense in which the Black World is one, and this oneness lays the foundation and establishes our need for serious dialogue. Marcus Garvey expressed this point in his ill-fated "back to Africa" movement. With a similar philosophical ideal but a radically different political vision, W.E.B. DuBois, George Padmore and Kwame Nkrumah expressed the unity of the Black World in their development of Pan-Africanism. But we do not need to accept Garveyism or the Pan-African philosophy of DuBois in order to realize that the future of Africa and black people in the Americas is inextricably bound together. Inter-

national economic and political arrangements require a certain kind of African and black nationalism if we are to liberate ourselves from European and white American domination. This economic and political domination, sharply enhanced and defined by racism, will not cease simply through an appeal to reason or the religious piety of those who hold us in captivity. Oppression ceases only when the victims accumulate enough power to stop it.

The oneness that I refer to is made possible by a common historical option available to both Africans and black Americans in their different social contexts. Each of us can make a choice that establishes our solidarity with the liberation of the Black World from European and American domination. This domination is not only revealed in the particularity of American white racism or European colonialism in Africa, but also in Euro-American imperialism in Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. World history has been written by "white hands" (to borrow a graphic expression from Leonardo Boff), and the time has come to recover the memory of the victims of this world. The need to reinterpret history and theology in the light of the hopes and struggles of the oppressed peoples of the world establishes not only a oneness between Africans and black Americans, but also makes possible our common solidarity with the liberation of the poor in Asia and Latin America. This global perspective requires that we enlarge the oneness of the Black World to include our solidarity with the world's poor. It was this assumption that defined the "Final Statement" of the Ecumenical Dialogue of Third World Theologians that met in Tanzania (August, 1976),¹² and it continues to shape our dialogue in Ghana. To be sure, we must recognize that we live in quite different historical and contemporary situations, which will naturally influence certain emphases in our theologies. But we should guard against the tendency of allowing our various particularities to blind us to the significance of our commonality. It is a oneness grounded in a common historical option for the poor and against societal structures that oppress them. This "poor perspective" (to use an apt phrase from Gustavo Gutierrez) makes us one and establishes the possibility of our mutual sharing in the creation of one humanity.

II.

The possibility of substantive dialogue between African Theology and other Third World theologies is created not only on the basis of our common historical option, but also on the basis of our common faith in Jesus Christ. Because we confess Jesus as Lord, we are required to work out the meaning of that confession in a common historical project. Faith and practice belong together. If we are one in Christ Jesus, then this oneness should be seen in our struggle together to create societal structures that bear witness to our vision of humanity. If our common confession of faith is in no way related to a common historical commit-

ment, how do we know that what we call the universal church is not the figment of our theological imagination? I contend that the unity of the Church can only be found in a common historical commitment.

Anyone acquainted with my theological perspective knows that I have placed much emphasis on the social context of theology. And I have no intention of relinquishing this point in this paper. But it is important to recognize the limitation of our particularity so that we will not ignore the universal claims that the gospel lays upon all of us. Whether Christians live in Africa, Asia, Latin America or Europe, we have been called by God to bear witness to the gospel of Jesus to all peoples. Therefore, we must ask not only what does the gospel mean for me in Africa or North America, but also for Christians in the whole inhabited world. And our explication of the gospel must be universal enough to include the material conditions in which people are forced to live. There is only one history, one Creator, and one Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It is the centrality of this faith claim that brings us together and requires us to have dialogue with each other about its meaning in society. Our cultural limitations do not render us silent but open us up to share with others our perspective about the historical possibility for the creation of a new humanity.

What is the universal dimension of the gospel that transcends culture and thus lays a claim upon all Christians no matter what situation they find themselves in?¹³ This is the question that every theology must seek to answer. Because our various theologies are so decidedly determined by our historical option in a given context, different answers have been given to this question. Because dominant European and American theologies have chosen an option that establishes their solidarity with western imperialism and capitalism, they usually define the universality of the gospel in terms that do not challenge the white western monopoly of the world's resources. There have been many debates in traditional theology about the precise content of the essence of the gospel, but seldom has the debate included political and economic realities that separate the rich nations from the poor ones. This is not an accident, and our meeting together in Ghana means that we recognize the danger of defining the universal aspect of the gospel in the light of western culture.

We meet here today because we are in search for other theological options than the ones found in traditional theology. I believe that we will find our common vision of the gospel through a serious encounter of the biblical message as defined by our common historical commitment in our various social contexts. We must be prepared to listen to each other, and to learn what it means to be historically involves in the realization of the gospel. Our dialogue is only beginning, and it is thus too early to expect unanimous agreement on various issues. But

if we take seriously our common faith in the crucified Christ, as encountered in the struggle for freedom, then I believe that God's Spirit will break down the barriers that separate us. For Christian "unity only becomes a reality to the extent that we partake of Christ (who) is hidden in those who suffer."^{13a} It is within this ecumenical context that I will venture to say a word about the future of African Theology.

III.

The future of African Theology is found in its creative interpretation of the gospel for the African situation and in relation to the theologies of the poor throughout the world. This emphasis does not exclude the legitimacy of African Theology's concern with indigenization and selfhood¹⁴ in its attempt to relate the biblical message to the African cultural and religious situation. But selfhood and indigenization should not be limited to cultural changes alone. There is a political ingredient in the gospel that cannot be ignored if one is to remain faithful to biblical revelation. The recognition of this political ingredient in the gospel is clearly implied in the All-Africa Conference of Churches' call for a moratorium and in its continued support of the liberation movements in Southern Africa. It is within this context that we should understand Canon Burgess Carr's highly publicized distinction between the "selective violence employed by the Liberation Movement" and the "'collective vengeance' perpetrated by the South African, Rhodesian and Portuguese regimes in Africa. Thus, any outright rejection of violence is an untenable alternative for African Christians."¹⁵ These words caused a great deal of unrest. He drew a radical theological conclusion from the liberation struggles of African people, and the churches of Africa and Europe are still trying to assimilate its significance.

If for no other reason, we must give our unequivocal support to the Liberation Movements, because they have helped the Church to rediscover a new and radical appreciation of the cross. In accepting the violence of the cross, God, in Jesus Christ, sanctified violence into a redemptive instrument for bringing into being a fuller human life.¹⁶

Burgess Carr is not alone among African theologians and church people who define liberation as a common theme in the gospel. "Liberation" writes Jesse Mugambi, "is the objective task of contemporary African Christian Theology. It is not just one of the issues, but rather, all issues are aimed at liberating Africans from all forces that hinder them from living fully as a human being." According to Mugambi, the idea of liberation is inherent in the concept of salvation. "In the

African context, and in the Bible, salvation as a theological concept cannot be complete without liberation as a social/political concept."¹⁷ A similar point is also made by Eliwaha Mshana: "Africanization must involve liberation from centuries of poverty, humiliation and exploitation. A truly African Theology cannot escape the requirement of helping the indigenous churches to become relevant to the spiritual, social, and political ills of Africa."¹⁸ Kofi Appiah-Kubi also includes liberation as an important ingredient of African Theology. He not only uses liberation as an important christological theme in Africa,¹⁹ but locates liberation in his definition of African Theology. African Theology, he contends, "should be a liberating theology, liberating us from the chains of social, economic, political and even at times traditional and cultural dominations and oppressions."²⁰

No African theologians, however, have expressed the theme of liberation more dramatically than South African theologians. Desmond Tutu²¹ and Manas Buthelezi^{22a} are prominent examples of this new theological perspective emerging from behind the Apartheid walls of the Republic of South Africa. Both have challenged African theologians to take seriously the political ingredient of the gospel as related to the contemporary problems of Africa. Desmond Tutu is emphatic:

African theology has failed to produce a sufficiently sharp cutting edge. ...It has seemed to advocate disengagement from the hectic business of life because very little has been offered that is pertinent, say, about the theology of power in the face of the epidemic of coups and military rule, about development, about poverty and disease and other equally urgent present day issues. I believe this is where the abrasive Black Theology may have a few lessons for African Theology. It may help to recall African Theology to its vocation to be concerned for the poor and the oppressed, about (people's) need for liberation from all kinds of bondage to enter in an authentic personhood which is constantly undermined by pathological religiosity and by political authority which has whittled away much personal freedom without too much opposition from the church.^{22b}

These are strong words and they remind us all of the prophetic calling of the Church and theology.

Additional examples of this African perspective in theology are found in a collection of essays entitled Essays on Black Theology. This book was banned by the Republic of South Africa and was later published in Britain under the title Black Theology: The South African Voice.²³

More recently Allan Boesak has added his contribution to South African Black Theology with his publication of Farewell to Innocence.²⁴ The central theme among these new theological voices from South Africa is their focus on liberation in relation to politics and blackness. They insist that blackness is an important ingredient in their view of African Theology.

Unfortunately, John Mbiti and Edward Fashole-Luke have been very critical of this South African Black Theology as being too narrowly focused on blackness, liberation, and politics.²⁵ Both contend that Christian theology must transcend race and politics. I believe that their criticisms are misplaced because the theme of liberation, as interpreted by the particularity of the African economic and political situation, provides the most creative direction for the future development of African Theology. If God came to us in the human presence of Jesus, then no theology can transcend the material conditions of humanity and still retain its Christian identity. Jesus did not die on the cross in order to transcend human suffering, but rather so that it might be overcome. Therefore, any theology whose distinctive perspective is defined by Jesus is required to find its creative expression in the practice of overcoming suffering.

The need for African Theology to focus on politics and liberation arises not only out of a christological necessity. It is also a necessity that arises out of the ecumenical context of contemporary theology. By locating the definition of African Theology in the context of the political and economic conditions of Africa, African theologians can easily separate their theological enterprise from the prefabricated theologies of Europe and establish their solidarity with other Third World theologies. This point is suggested by Canon Burgess Carr.

The forthrightness of Black Theology and the theology of liberation canvassed today presents a dual challenge to our Christian style of life. In a profound way, it challenges the preoccupation with African Theology to advance beyond academic phenomenological analysis to a deeper appropriation of the ethical sanctions inherent in our traditional religious experience. It also forces Christians to come to grips with the radical character of the gospel of Jesus as an ideological framework for their engagement in the struggle for cultural authenticity, human development, justice and reconciliation.²⁶

If Black Theology's focus on liberation is its challenge to African Theology, what then is the challenge of African Theology to Black Theology, Latin American Liberation Theology, and theology in Asia? Unless

the challenge is mutual, then there is no way for substantive dialogue to take place. I believe that African Theology's challenge to us is found by rejecting prefabricated theology, liturgies and traditions and focusing the theological task on the selfhood of the Church and the incarnation of Christianity in the life and thought of Africa. African theologians challenge all Christians in the Third World to take seriously popular religion and unestablished expressions of Christianity. Perhaps more than any other Third World theological expression, African Theology takes seriously the symbols and beliefs of the people whom all liberation theologians claim to represent. If liberation theology in any form is to represent the hopes and dreams of the poor, must not that representation be found in its creative appropriation of the language and culture of the people? If the poor we claim to represent do not recognize themselves in our theologies, how then will they know that we speak for them? From their earliest attempt to create an African Theology, African theologians are agreed that their theology must take seriously three sources: The Bible, African Traditional Religion, and the African Independent Churches. The appropriation of these sources structurally located the theological task among the poor people of Africa. Until recently Latin American Liberation Theology has tended to overlook the importance of this cultural ingredient in theology. The same is true to some extent of American Black Theology and perhaps, to a lesser degree, of theology in Asia.²⁷

The relation between indigenization and liberation does not have to be antagonistic. In fact, we need both emphases. Without the indigenization of theology, liberation theology's claim to be derived from and accountable to oppressed peoples is a farce. Indigenization opens the door for the people's creative participation in the interpretation of the gospel for their life situation. But indigenization without liberation limits a given theological expression to the particularity of its cultural context. It fails to recognize the universal dimension of the gospel and the global context of theology. It fails to recognize the universal dimension of the gospel and the global context of theology. It is simply not enough to indigenize Christianity or to Africanize theology. The people also want to be liberated from racism, sexism, and classism. If theology is to be truly indigenized, its indigenization must include in it a social analysis that takes seriously the human struggles against race, sex, and class oppression. I contend therefore that indigenization and liberation belong together. The future of African Theology, and all Third World theologies, is found in the attempt to interpret the Christian gospel in the historical context of the people's struggle to liberate themselves from all forms of human oppression.

NOTES

1. The beginning of the contemporary Civil Rights movement of American Blacks is usually identified with the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, led by Martin Luther King, Jr., December, 1955. For an account of this event, see Martin Luther King, Jr., Stride Toward Freedom (New York: Harper, 1958). For more information about the later development of this movement in the 1960's and Martin King's reaction to the rise of Black Power, see his Why We Can't Wait (New York: Harper, 1963) and Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community (New York: Harper).
2. For an account of the rise of Black Power, see Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, Black Power: The Politics of Black Liberation (New York: Random House, 1967).
3. John Mbiti, "An African Views American Black Theology," Worldview, August, 1974, p. 43.
4. John Mbiti was the Harry Emerson Fosdick Visiting Professor at Union Theological Seminary during the academic year of 1972-73.
5. I was especially disturbed by Mbiti's assertion that "Black Theology ...is full of sorrow, bitterness, anger and hatred." I know of no black American theologian who would accept this description of Black Theology.
6. See his "What is African Theology?" Africa Theological Journal, #4, August, 1971.
7. See his "The Quest for African Christian Theology," The Journal of Religious Thought, #2, Vol. XXXII, Fall-Winter, 1975. This issue is devoted to essays presented at the consultation on African and Black Theology, Accra, December, 1974. See also an earlier article in which Fashole-Luke questions the possibility of the development of an African Theology, "An African Indigenous Theology: Fact or Fiction?" , The Sierra Leone Bulletin of Religion, 1969.
8. While Kwesi Dickson is not as emphatic about the distinction between Black and African Theology, as suggested by Mbiti, Sawyerr and Fashole-Luke, the sharp separation of African Theology from Black Theology is clearly implied in his writings. See his contribution at the Ghana Consultation, "African Theology: Origin, Methodology and Content," Journal of Religious Thought, Fall-Winter, 1975. See also his "Towards a Theologia Africana" in M. E. Glasswell and E. W. Fashole-Luke, New Testament Christianity for Africa and the World

- (London: S.P.C.K., 1974); "The Old Testament and African Theology," The Ghana Bulletin of Theology, vol. 4, 3\$, June, 1973; "The African Theological Task" in The Emergent Gospel edited by Sergio Torres and Virginia Fabella (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1978).
9. A partial account of these exceptions is treated in the third section of this paper.
 10. (Nashville: AMEC, 1975).
 11. The Souls of Black Folk (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett publ., 1961). Originally published in 1903, pp. 16-17.
 12. See The Emergent Gospel, edited by S. Torres and V. Fabella, pp. 259 ff.
 13. This question involves the problem of ideology in theological discourse. I have discussed the implications of this problem in my God of the Oppressed (New York: Seabury, 1975).
 - 13a. Rubem Alves, "Protestantism in Latin America: Its Ideological Function and Utopian Possibilities," The Ecumenical Review, January, 1970, p. 15.
 14. The themes of selfhood and indigenization are very prominent in African theology. On indigenization, see the important book by Bolaji Idowu, Towards An Indigenous Church (London: Oxford University Press, 1965); Kwesi Dickson and Paul Ellingworth (eds.), Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969). On the theme of selfhood, see Kwesi Dickson, "African Theology: Origin, Methodology and Content," Journal of Religious Thought: The Struggle Continues, official report, Third Assembly of the All Africa Conference of Churches, Lusaka, May 1974. This theme is also found in the report of the First Assembly of the AACC in Kampala, 1963. See Drumbeats From Kampala (London: Lutterworth Press, 1963).
 15. "The Engagement of Lusaka" in The Struggle Continues, p. 78.
 16. Ibid., p. 78.
 17. "Liberation and Theology" in WSCF Dossier No. 5, June 1974, pp. 41-42.
 18. "The Challenge of Black Theology and African Theology," Africa Theological Journal, No. 5, 1972.
 19. See his "Jesus Christ - Some Christological Aspects From African Perspectives" in African and Asian Contributions to Contemporary Theology, edited by John Mbiti (Celigny: WCC Ecumenical Institute, Bossey, 1977).

20. "Why African Theology?" AACC Bulletin, Vol. VII, No. 4, July-August 1974, p. 6.
21. See his contribution at the Ghana Consultation on African and Black Theology, "Black Theology/African Theology: Soul Mates or Antagonists," Journal of Religious Thought, Fall-Winter, 1975; see also his "Black Theology," Frontier, Summer 1974; "African and Black Theologies," An Interview in the AACC Bulletin, Vol. 7, No. 4, July-August 1974.
- 22a. See his contribution "Toward Indigenous Theology in South Africa," in The Emergent Gospel; see also his important essay "An African Theology or a Black Theology," in Essays on Black Theology, edited by George Mokgethi Motlhabi (Johannesburg, 1972). Other essays by Buthelezi include "Apartheid in the Church is Damnable Heresy," AACC Bulletin, Vol. 9, No. 2; "Daring to Live for Christ" in Mission Trends No. 3: Third World Theologies, edited by G. H. Anderson and T. F. Stransky (New York: Paulist Press, 1976).
- 22b. "Black Theology/African Theology: Soul Mates or Antagonists," p.32-33.
23. Edited by Basil Moore (London: Hurst, 1973). This book was later published in the United States under the title The Challenge of Black Theology in South Africa by John Knox Press. The original book, Essays on Black Theology, was edited by Mokgethi Motlhabi.
24. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1977).
25. See John Mbiti, "African Theology," Worldview, August 1973, pp. 37f; see also his "Some Current Concerns of African Theology," The Expository Times, March 1976, p. 166. See E. W. Fashole-Luke, "The Quest for an African Christian Theology," Journal of Religious Thought, p. 87 f. Fashole-Luke writes: "In the Republic of South Africa, African Theology is equated with Black Theology and the emphasis on Blackness indicates the ethnic implications of the task; considerable attention is given there to the exposition of the Gospel on terms of liberation from political, social and economic injustice, and the creation of a new sense of dignity and equality in the face of white oppression and discrimination. It is surely at this critical point that African theologians are challenged by the Gospel to raise African Christian theologies above the level of ethnic or racial categories and emphasis, so that Christians everywhere will see that Christianity is greater and richer than any of its cultural manifestations, and that the Gospel of Liberation is for the oppressed and oppressor alike" (Ibid., pp. 87-88).
26. "The Engagement of Lusaka," p. 78.
27. African Theology's concern to use the thought forms for the people is not a slogan. The extensive research that African theologians have done on indigenous African religions and unestablished forms of Christianity does not have its counterpart among Latin American liberation theologians or even among black theologians in the U.S. John Mbiti has been one of the most prolific in this area. His books include New Testament Eschatology in an African Background (London: Oxford University Press, 1971); African Religions and Philosophy (London: Heinemann, 1969);

Concepts of God in Africa (London, 1970). Some of his articles that are particularly appropriate in this discussion are "The Growing Respectability of African Traditional Religion" Lutheran World, Geneva, Vol. LIX, No. 236, Oct. 1970; "The Ways and Means of Communicating the Gospel," in C. G. Baeta (ed) Christianity in Tropical Africa, (London, 1968).

Other African theologians' work in this area include Harry Sawyerr, Creative Evangelism: Towards a New Christian Encounter with Africa, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1968); God: Ancestor or Creator (Longman, 1970); Bolaji Idowu, Olodumare, (London, 1962); African Traditional Religion: A Definition (London).

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